

GREAT BIRDS OF FIRE

*The Pterodactyl is
a huge flying
dinosaur-type bird,
which has a voracious
appetite for
raw meat.
It is also extinct ...*

... or is it?

Extracted from chapter 9 of the book
Lost Cities of North & Central America
by David Hatcher Childress

Available through Nexus Magazine
PO Box 30, Mapleton Qld 4560
Price: \$25 (includes postage)

The sun was beating down mercilessly. It was as hot in Texas as it was in Mexico. I had crossed the border into Texas at Brownsville a few days before and had stayed at a trailer court that my mother and stepfather owned, though they lived in Arizona.

I had promised them that I would look at the trailer court and make sure that the couple they had hired to manage it were keeping it in good condition.

After resting for a few days, it was fortunate that my old pickup truck was sitting in the parking lot. After looking under the hood, and a few trips down to the local auto parts store, I had the truck running and was now on my way across Texas, heading for Arizona. My first main stop was Big Bend National Park in the south-west portion of the state.

Texas has its share of mysteries, lost treasure and ancient civilisations. A number of stone heads and pottery figures have been found in Texas, including a ceramic figure found near Cisco, Texas, that was identified in 1946 by three professors from the University of Mexico as the figure of the Aztec god of agriculture, Xipe-Totec. They surmised that the head had been made between the 10th and 12th centuries. Larger, stone heads have been discovered at Cross Plains, Texas, that wore conical hats and were "very old". Myself, I was after pterodactyls.

"Pterodactyl pens? How far are they?" I asked. I shielded the sun from my eyes, and looked at the man with a cowboy hat and blue cotton shirt.

"Just nearby, across the creek," said the sun-weathered rancher. He had on a brown cowboy hat and a red checkered shirt. I followed him across a bridge that crossed the small creek in front of us and then noticed some rock walls along a cliff.

"These here are the pterodactyl pens," said the man pointing to the ancient, crumbling structures.

"Why do they call them pterodactyl pens?" I asked.

"Well, they have these legends around here about pterodactyls," he said. "I've never seen one around here myself, though. Just in a museum."

I stopped and looked at the walls. They were like pens, and since they were against cliffs, they could have been made into cages. Still, they were maybe just the ruins of a small settlement. Though pterodactyl pens was an intriguing notion, it was less likely an explanation than others.

The subject of living pterodactyls is, however, a fascinating subject, and one that is not to be shrugged off lightly. Strange and persistent legends abound in the south-west of giant winged creatures. These stories have been told since before the Spanish arrived and continue to this day. Some radical theorists have gone so far as to say that these legends and sightings can be attributed to still-living flying dinosaurs—to pterodactyls or, more precisely, pterodons.

There are literally hundreds of reports of giant birds and flying lizards showing up around the world. And it is a fact that the remains of pterodons have been discovered at Big Bend National Park. The park was the site of the discovery of the skeleton of a giant pteranodon in 1975. It had a wingspan of 51 feet and is the largest such fossil of a flying reptile so far discovered. Other pterodactyls were much smaller and had wingspans from 8 to 20 feet.

Though pterodons are believed to have become extinct about 65 million years ago, this may not necessarily be the case. Many creatures which lived at that time are still alive, such as crocodiles, turtles, and the famous coelacanth. Even the date of the fossil of the giant pteronodon recently found at Big Bend is in question. Since fossils cannot be dated by any known technical method, their age is guessed at from the geological strata around it, and since the current dating of geological strata is based on the prevailing uniformitarian theory of slow geological change, the date of many fossils may be radically closer to our own than 65 million years.

Almost every Indian tribe from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego has legends of a gigantic flying monster so large that "...it darkened the sun". The Haida natives of the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia believe that some Thunderbirds were so large that they could lit-



erally pick up small whales from the sea. Much of their art and woodcarving depicts exactly such a capture by a Thunderbird.

Some South American Indians believed that the bird was constantly at war with the powers living beneath the sea, particularly a horned serpent, and that it tore up large trees in search of giant grubs which were its favourite food.

The clapping of these giants' wings created thunder, so they were known as "Thunderbirds". The Navajo Indians still perform their Thunderbird dance, and tell the legends of the 'cliff monster which lived in a high craggy roost, descending to carry people off to feed to its young'. Carvings of what appear to be pterodons can be found in Mayan ruins at Tajin, north-eastern Vera Cruz state in Mexico, and on a bluff facing the Mississippi River near Alton, Illinois.

One amazing story that appeared in the Tombstone, Arizona, *Epitaph* on 26 April 1890, related:

"A winged monster, resembling a huge alligator with an extreme-

ly elongated tail and an immense pair of wings, was found on the desert between Whetstone and Huachuca mountains last Sunday by two ranchers who were returning home from the Huachucas. The creature was evidently greatly exhausted by a long flight, and when discovered was able to fly but a short distance at a time. After the first shock of amazement had passed, the two men, who were on horseback and armed with Winchester rifles, regained sufficient courage to pursue the monster, and after an exciting chase of several miles, succeeded in getting near enough to open fire with their rifles and wound it.

"The creature then turned on the men, but owing to its exhausted condition they were able to keep out of its way, and after a few well-directed shots the monster partly rolled over and remained motionless. The men cautiously approached with their horses snorting in terror and found that the creature was dead.

"They then proceeded to make an examination and found that it measured about 92 feet in length and the greatest diameter was about 50 inches. The monster had only two feet, these being situated a short distance in front of where the wings were joined to the body. The head, as near as they could judge, was about 8 feet long, the jaws being thickly set with strong sharp teeth. Its eyes were as large as a dinner plate and protruding about halfway from the head. They had some difficulty in measuring the wings as they were partly folded under the body, but finally got one straightened out sufficiently to get a measurement of 78 feet, making the total length from tip to tip about 160 feet.

"The wings were composed of a thick and nearly transparent membrane and were devoid of feathers and hair, as was the entire body. The skin of the body was comparatively smooth and easily penetrated by a bullet. The men cut off a portion of the tip of one wing and took it home with them. Late last night one of them arrived in this city for supplies and to make the necessary preparations to skin the creature, when the hide will be sent east for examination by the eminent scientists of the day. The finder returned early this morning accompanied by several prominent men who will endeavour to bring the strange creature to this city before it is mutilated."

Since no mention of this creature is made in any following issues of the *Epitaph*, it would seem to be a hoax, possibly created to boost the circulation of the paper or enliven a boring week in Tombstone. Especially considering the

incredible size of this creature, it would seem that there was at least some exaggeration involved. Still, one wonders if these two cowboys encountered one of the last of the Thunderbirds.

There is another variation of this story that says that a photo was taken of a pterodactyl in 1886 when a creature was shot by two cowboys and then nailed to the Tombstone *Epitaph* wall. According to the Fortean investigator John Keel, more than 20 people have written to him claiming to have seen this photo of a dead pterodactyl nailed to the side of a building in Tombstone. Keel claims that he has seen this photo too, but no one can remember where!

In his column "Beyond the Known" in the March 1991 issue of *Fate* magazine, Keel discusses this intriguing photograph at length. He also quotes from a letter from the son of a Pennsylvania man named Robert Lyman who had written numerous articles and books about the weird and the unknown. Lyman wrote about